

Article Review
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April 2001

Combs, William W. “The Preservation of Scripture.”
Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 5 (2000): 3-44.

Introduction

William W. Combs, Academic Dean of *Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary*, has interjected his article entitled “The Preservation of Scripture” in the current fray concerning the preservation of Scripture. His article includes 157 footnotes in 42 pages of relevant discussion. Combs apparently wants to distinguish between the three prevailing views of preservation and their conclusions among conservatives, which views are the “miraculous,” providential preservation view (KJV/TR [King James Version/Textus Receptus] and MT [Majority Text]); the no preservation view (D. Wallace, E. Glenny); and his “totality of manuscripts” view (pp. 6-12; 37).

Combs outlines his article following the significant rubrics entitled “Views on Preservation,” “Examination of the Biblical Data,” “Is Preservation the Corollary of Inspiration?,” “The Argument from Authority,” “The Method and Extent of Preservation,” “The Question of Certainty (*sic*),” and “Is Public Availability a Necessary Component of Preservation?” These indeed are the appropriate subjects for any discussion on the preservation of Scripture. Combs’ article has provided a significant service for fundamental Baptists in the arena of bibliology. He has enunciated once for all the bibliological watershed for fundamentalists: what does the Bible attest to its own preservation?

The focus of the general debate on the preservation of Scripture and Combs’ specific arguments pivot on the exegesis of Scripture. Therefore this author will examine and refute Combs’ section on the “Examination of the Biblical Data,” and allow the resultant bibliology to follow. What seems most troubling to the KJV/TR proponents, of whom the author is one, is the Critical Text (CT) advocates’ ignorance about and cavalier dismissal of the teaching of the Bible.

The Bible’s Self-Attestation

suffixes (vv. 129, 152, 167). These examples include Psm. 119:152 (“Concerning thy testimonies [אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּיךָ־יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֵינוּ], I have known of old that thou has founded them [אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּיךָ־יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֵינוּ] for ever”), which Combs affirms to be “a fairly direct promise of preservation” of the written form of the Torah (p. 18). As the KJV/TR bibliologists have argued all along, both the context and the grammar (proximity rule and accepted gender discordance) of Psm. 12:6-7 demand the teaching of the preservation of the Lord’s pure words for every generation.

Next, Combs quotes the *NIV* rendering “you will keep *us* safe and protect *us*...” to argue for the preservation of saints interpretation. However, the *NIV*’s translation of “us” for “them” is based on inferior Hebrew texts influenced by Greek. Furthermore, the context of the whole Psalm argues forcefully for the preservation of the words of God which are the antidote for the words of men in every generation.

Combs and his ilk do not have a convincing grammatical, biblical or theological argument for the “preservation of saints” interpretation in Psm. 12:6-7. The proper, contextual exegesis of this passage teaches that the Lord has preserved the pure originals intact for every generation.

Psalm 119:89

Combs rejects D. Waite’s view that this verse teaches that there is a perfect Bible in heaven that has been preserved for man on earth. Combs warns about assuming that word of the Lord refers to God’s written revelation. Then he admits that some non-KJV/TR scholars such as W. Grudem hold that God has a copy of words in heaven that He has “committed to writing by men” (p. 16). Next, Combs makes the bold and erroneous statement that “there is nothing in the rest of Scripture to suggest the idea of an archetypal Bible in heaven” (p.17). However, the bibliologist must recognize that the interpreting angel for Daniel promised the prophet that “*I will shew thee that which is noted* (אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּיךָ־יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֵינוּ literally ‘inscribed’) *in the scripture of truth* (אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּיךָ־יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֵינוּ)” in Daniel 10:21. The content of the angel’s revelation was the prophecy of the history of the kingdoms of the world, including those of Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Antichrist (Dan. 11:2-45). One wonders where this prophetic history was inscribed if not in heaven? And if part of the Bible is inscribed in heaven, why not all? And if Daniel did not perfectly record and God did not perfectly preserve this heavenly Bible, how would one know if the events did actually occur according to the preserved words, thereby confirming this heavenly book of *truth*?

Conceding for a moment that Psm. 119:89 might refer to a heavenly Bible, Combs warns that this might lead to some sort of dictation theory, even though he admits some of the Bible such as the decalogue was dictated to the writer(s) (p. 17). That very few KJV/TR advocates embrace the erroneous aspects of the dictation theory makes this argument nugatory.

Psalm 119:152, 160

Isaiah 40:8

Matthew 5:17-18

Second, Combs asserts that manuscript evidence does not allow for an inerrant copy of the autographical words. This argumentation reveals the major flaw in Combs'

bibliology: the manuscript evidence in history takes pre-eminence over the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ! In fact, he continues his defense by stating that the Lord spoke His promise as hyperbole. The Lord led believers to understand, through “a conscious exaggeration,” that His written revelation could not be changed, but this does not mean that the very minute parts and letters of His words of His prophecies in His documents would be unchanged (p. 22)! However, in point of fact, nothing in Mt. 5:17-18 is hyperbolic. He came to fulfill the law and prophets literally; heaven and earth will pass away literally (II Pet. 3:10); and He will fulfill literally every word of every prophecy in minute detail (Rev. 19:10). It is spiritually dangerous indeed to reject the clear statements of Christ to defend a theological position. At the judgment, it will have been better to have erred on the conservative side than the liberal side relative to the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, to this writer it is no more hyperbolic to believe that the Lord makes the astonishing and wonderful promise to forgive sins than it is that He makes the promise to preserve perfectly each jot and tittle of all of His canonical words.

John 10:35

Combs responds to Waite and D. Brake, who indeed argue for the doctrine of the preservation of Scripture, stating that this verse is not a “direct” assertion of preservation (p. 23). He does admit, however, that this verse has an important implication for the preservation of Scripture. By this time in Combs’ article, these cautious expressions, such as “more indirect,” “more direct,” “imply,” etc., begin to wear thin and are unconvincing.

Matthew 24:35

Again, Combs rejects outright Waite’s interpretation of Mt. 24:35. Combs states that “this verse would seem to promise too much” (p. 24). Based on Jn. 21:25, he assures his readers that the Lord Jesus must have spoken about some of the things He did but are not recorded. While his observation may be true, his inference is invalid. Obviously, not all of Christ’s spoken words have been preserved, so this must be a promise for the preservation of His canonical Words which constitute the written Scriptures. The Lord Jesus Christ submitted Himself to the written revelation of God when He responded to Satan’s temptations (Mt. 4:4 ff.). It is utter foolishness to interpret this verse as meaning that the Lord promised to preserve all of His oral words, because He has not done that. He has preserved His canonical words and these words (i.e., the words of the written Scripture) will be the standard to which all men should live (at least from the time of the inscripturation of the book of Revelation and on) and by which all men will be judged (Mt. 12:48)!

Combs then states that this verse is another example of hyperbole and merely refers to the authority of the Lord’s oral words. There is nothing in the passage to suggest hyperbole and as a matter of fact, the Lord Jesus Christ’s un-inscriptured and non-canonical oral words do not have biblical authority! There is one example of the Lord’s supposed *agrapha* and God had it inscriptured in Acts 20:35, consequently making “*it is more blessed to give than to receive*” authoritative. Combs’ bibliology is once again dangerous and unbiblical.

I Peter 1:23-25

Although Combs argues along the same lines as he did with Isa. 40:8, what Combs omits is that Peter's preached sermons were inscripturated not only in Acts (2:14 ff., *et al*) but also in I Peter (cf. II Pet. 3:1). Peter declares that his preached words have been inscripturated as the word of God and endures forever.

New Testament Bibliology

Combs' Position

Combs rightly argues that preservation is a corollary of inspiration (pp. 27-28), that authority is an issue (pp. 29-30) and that Christians have the need for certainty (pp. 37-41). However, he wrongly states that "we are told neither the *method* nor the *extent* of this preservation" (p. 30). Finally, drawing entirely on OT passages, Combs rejects the position that public availability is a necessary component of preservation (pp. 41-43). Combs' bibliology falls under the same condemnation that he has for Wallace and Glenny. His is a "minimalist approach" (cf. p. 8) in that Combs does not say enough about the clear promises of Scripture for verbal preservation. Beginning with the view that manuscript evidence takes precedence over Scriptural promises, Combs must argue that the textual theories of Westcott-Hort have produced the Critical Text which in turn is foundational to the modern versions, including the *NASV* (*New American Standard Version*). He must in turn argue the illogic that although the *NASV* and the *KJV* (which he vehemently denigrates) differ, they are both accurate copies of Scripture (is Combs suggesting that his bibliology is "bi-textual"?). How things that differ can be the same is a question he never seems to answer. He concludes that he "simply" prefers and "honestly" believes that the CT "is somewhat more accurately representative" of the originals (p. 42), at the same time being opposed, hypocritically, to the *KJV/TR* proponents having the same privilege of public declaration. The Bible attests to the preservation of itself as a document, Combs maintains, and any supposed promises of perfect, verbal preservation are not really made and Christ's promises of preservation must be understood as mere hyperbole (cf. pp. 37; 43-44).

Christ's Position

The Lord Jesus Christ asseverates about several bibliological truths. He did not rebuke the Devil with His own authoritative but non-inscripturated, oral commands, but instead submitted Himself to the preserved, written OT Scriptures when tempted (Mt. 4:4 ff.; cf. Psm. 138:2). He promised to fulfill the jots and tittles of the words of the documents containing the OT prophecies (Mt. 5:17-18). He warned that His canonical words must be received, not rejected, because they would be the ultimate judge of all mankind (Jn. 12:48). The Lord began the received Bible movement by receiving words from the Father and in turn giving these heavenly words (Psm. 119:89; Dan. 10:21) to His followers to receive and inscripturate in the Scriptures for all mankind (Jn. 17:8, 20, *et al*). He required his followers to receive His inspired canonical words and preserve them

through His new institution called the local, immersionist church (Mt. 28:19-20; I Tim. 3:15). These NT churches did in fact receive and keep or preserve His words (cf. Rev. 3:8). Although the testimony of historical evidence is incomplete and therefore secondary, the Lord used His NT churches through history to preserve His words. The influence of these NT churches on the preserved text is manifested from time to time in examples such as the Peshitta Syriac and other early versions, the church fathers, the Byzantine manuscripts, Erasmus, Beza, the *KJV* translators and fundamental Baptist churches of the 21st century.

The Bible teaches that man has the responsibility to preserve perfectly God's words and that God will preserve perfectly His words (not manuscripts). After all, the Lord instructed Daniel with the imperatives "shut up" (שָׁטוּם) the words and "seal" (סָאָל) the book that he had written (Dan. 12:4). Subsequently, the Lord asserted that "*the words are closed up* (סָאָל) *and sealed* (סָאָל) *till the time of the end*" (Dan. 12:9). The two truths of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in the perfect preservation of the Lord's words must be believed at face value. Neither truth may be rejected. Believing the Bible's self-attestations honors the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 11:6).

Conclusion

Comb's position appeals to the mind of the scholar. Christ's position appeals to the heart of the believer who hears the words of our Savior saying "*My sheep hear my voice*" (Jn. 10:27). May fundamental Bible believers believe and receive the Lord Jesus Christ's words which self-attest to their perfect word preservation.